

AN ENEMY DEBT

By
Perceval
Gibbon

HAVE no fear; this is not a war story. But it does identify one nameless hero of the Chemin des Dames, the private of the French Foreign Legion whose last words were spoken in German. The wounded men who lay with him in the ruins of the shell-crumbled trench are the witnesses of how, when the German bombers, backed by their bayonet-men, came blasting their way along from traverse to traverse, one among their own number arose, roaring, and charged over their broken bodies. Two bombers and a bayonet-man he killed with his bayonet and shot an officer before he himself was shot through the chest; then as he lay he shot another.

"And at each lunge and at each shot," testified one witness, "he cried aloud in German: 'I owe you that! I owe you that!'"

* * *

AT dawn he found a resting and hiding place on the brow of a little hill; and here he lay in the shelter of the great flat green fronds and looked out northward over a pleasant, farm-dotted plain of Algeria. Little white houses, iron-roofed or thatched, each with its barn alongside, stood among the crops; and from the nearest, scarce half a mile away, the smoke of the hearth was already rising. That night he must make shift to pass among them, for the road that ran straight as a taut string down to his left as he gazed was patrolled by mounted gendarmerie; and by day his uniform—he had not been able to get rid of it—was a clamant invitation to the first passer-by to help himself to the reward which was paid for the capture of a deserting Legionary.

He had no food, no money—soldiers of the Legion were not allowed to have money—no plan and no real hope. Because

France was at peace with the world he would not have to face a firing squad if he were caught. But he had a burning need to be free of the iron discipline, the terrible labor, the unending fear and pain that were the staple of his days. He did not know his way to the coast; even his escape had been an accident. He had been one of a fatigue party unloading a train-load of stores at Sidi Hafiz, and by a chance he was actually in one of the trucks when it had pulled out. It had carried him some thirty miles before he dropped off, lest it should be stopped by telegram and searched; and since then for fourteen nights he had blundered northwards, living on fruit stolen in the dark from orchards and occasional eggs raided from hen-houses, and for fourteen days



Illustrations by V. E. Pyles

feet first, deeper into the shelter of the prickly-pear. He gathered two or three of the fruit and expertly sucked the ice-cold, water-sodden pulp from them; his three years in the Legion, during brief halts in man-killing marshes, had taught him at least how to do that.

The air grew warm as the sun mounted, and the coolness upon the bare black earth under that low green roof was not unpleasant. He turned upon his back, his hands under his head, and presently he slept—slept like a babe and dreamed of his home in soft, simple Saxony, whence he had fled from the consequences of a poaching adventure. And by degrees his posture as he slept betrayed him and he began to snore.

He awoke suddenly at the touch of something wet on his face and started upon his elbow, rigid with terror. At his abrupt movement the dog which had reconnoitered him fell back with a rending snarl and stood at guard a couple of yards away. It was one of those nondescripts one sees in such lands as Algeria, as big as a collie, with the head of a degenerate sheep-dog and wool like a sheep. He stared at it in a stupidity of fear till his heart gave over pattering; but the dog continued to growl.

And then, from without the thicket, a voice called clearly.

"Qu'est ce que tu as trouvé, Maxi?" it said. "What have you found, Maxi?"

It was a woman's voice, but for the deserter women were as dangerous as men. Yet even

in his renewed anguish of fear he marked something, a bluntness and thickening of the pronunciation, an unhandiness in the use of the sharp French consonants, which sounded familiar.

The dog was yet bristling and growling. He held out a timid hand of conciliation to it and it effervesced at once into a tearing crescendo of snarls. And the voice spoke again.

"Also, bring's heraus!" it said. And repeated the call: "Bring it out and let's have a look at it."

His very senses reeled; a sudden almost overwhelming hope took possession of him. The German tongue and its accent, sweet and suggestive to him as the breath of kine, the mere sound of it without its significance—for the speaker merely called to and bantered the hobgoblin-dog—were like promises and words of sore-needed comfort. The dog began to yield to the call and retired with diminishing growls; the deserter got to his hands and knees and tried cautiously to get a glimpse of the speaker through the intervening twenty feet of tangled dull green.

And of a sudden he saw her. Prickly-pear branches, leaning this way and that, stood yet aside from one narrow avenue of vision. As through a long pipe he was aware of the shape of her head, the shape only, black against the sunshine and realized that while he was looking out against the light, she was looking in with the light at her back, to see what had attracted the dog. He dodged down again in a panic, but too late.

"Comment donc!" he heard her cry. "It is a man!"

He was discovered. But she was German, and the crazy hope her language had lighted in him refused to be quenched all at once. He crouched, shivering.



He found himself looking up from under the skirts of the prickly-pear at a girl of about his own age, tall and golden blond, with a face as regular as that of a clock. The dog, held in leash, made a white-fanged grimace of hate at him

he had lain hidden where best he might, trembling and sleeping, cursing, praying and weeping. And he was twenty-five years of age.

The face that looked out between the grass-edge and the heavy green curtain of the prickly-pear was marked with more than grime and tears. Lines that belong to age and bitter experience were graven there; they overlaid and qualified, like a figured veil, a certain commonplace comeliness, a compliance of feature with the ordinary standards of acceptable outwardness. And the stone-blue eyes that beheld that wide vista of comfort, security and freedom had a touch of that vacuity which comes when a man's soul is no longer his own.

He groaned and spoke aloud to the deaf world. "Ach, Gott!" he said. "Ich kann nichts mehr!"

Life began to show itself in the plain below. Figures moved on the farm, and on the long straight ribbon of the road a trickle of traffic—camels, Algerian peasants on donkeys, a recklessly-driven automobile—was gathering volume. He crawled back,

"Come out!" she called next, but in the French which is the official white language of the country. "Come out that one may see what you are! Else I will let the dog go! You hear me?"

In any case there was no escaping; it was surrender to her or to the help she would summon.

"I come at once!" he answered in German, and began to crawl towards her.

He found himself looking up from under the skirts of the prickly-pear at a figure that symbolized for him all the power and all the homeward draw of his yearned-for fatherland. A girl of about his own age, tall and buxom, golden-blond, with a face as regular as that of a clock and eyes of chill blue! The hill fell away behind her, and she stood in a splendid high relief against her background of cloudless sky, and the great sweep of plain.

She retreated only a single pace at his appearance and stood looking down at him with no least sign of fear. He knew she was making an inventory of him—his filth, his uniform, his presence in that particular place at that particular time.

He had risen to his knees. He hastened to speak, that she might know yet one more thing about him than her eyes could tell her.

"Gnädiges Fräulein!" he implored. "Gracious young lady! You will not betray me? See!" He spread his arms abroad with a manner of exhibiting himself and his plight. "I am nearly dead already. I am starving. I am all but broken down. And—and I heard you call the dear little dog in German. Say you will be merciful, for God's sake!"

"So!" she said, and surveyed him further. Then she cast a swift glance round. "We can be seen from the road," she said next. "Go back among the pear a little way."

He obeyed in piteous haste; the great hope flared up within him. And when only his face was to be seen she came closer.

"You are German then—and a deserter from the Legion?"

"Yes, gracious young lady!" he answered.

"And what is your name?"

She had a crisp, authoritative manner of questioning to which, broken as he was to obedience, he would have deferred anywhere.

"Egon Weiler," he answered. "At your orders," he added, in the slavish German formula.

She continued not so much to stare at him as to scrutinize him and seemingly to estimate him and the situation.

"If any of these French or natives see you," she said suddenly, "you will be done for. There is a reward for catching deserters."

"I know," he said, and sighed. "But you, gracious young lady—"

She shook her head. "You are a landsmann—a compatriot!" she made answer, and stilled him with a lifted hand when he

would have frothed into a hysteria of thanks. "Now let me think what we must do!"

She strolled apart a while, pondering. The "dear little dog," more offensively hideous than ever in the full light of day, made a white-fanged grimace of hate at Egon Weiler and followed her. The deserter waited, his soul swinging like a pendulum between exultation and despair.

She came back at last.

"That is our house," she said, pointing down to the nearest white dwelling. "My father is away, and I am alone there with my grandmother. So today you had better stay here; and tonight, when it is fully dark, you can come down. I will have some food for you and you can sleep in the loft. My father comes back in two or three days and then we can see what to do with you."

"But even then you will not give me up?" he flustered.

"You do not know my father," she replied. "He does not love the French! They have been very hard on him."

He burst into a rhapsody of thanks, the tears streaming down on his face, and this time she did not stop him but watched him with an interest that had a scientific touch about it.

"I must go," she said, when he choked into silence at last. "Some one may see from afar. Tonight then; but not until it is quite dark. You understand?"

"Perfectly, gracious young lady!"

"Also, auf wiedersehen!" And she swung off down the hill followed by the irreconcilable dear little dog.

And Egon Weiler, prone in his hiding-place, was aware of a sensation of physical sickness. He was not used to happiness and good fortune and he had had an overdose of both. A colossal pride had likewise a place in his emotions, a pride in his country and his race. It had answered to the touchstone. He was solitary no longer, but a member of a great and powerful freemasonry, reaching forth even into Algeria tentacles of succor and reassurance. All would yet be well with him—and that evening there would be food.

He was even nearer to a breakdown than he had told the girl, for the spirit had been sapped from him and only fear had replaced it. When the slow-footed day had limped to its close and the hateful dimness of evening had yielded to the benign and welcome dark, he found it all he could do to drag himself down the slope and discover the path that led to the house. Much precaution was out of the question; he was an easy capture for anyone by the time he found the gate in the fence about the house; his efforts to open it brought the girl out swiftly to the veranda.

"Hush!" she whispered, sharply. "Do you want everyone to hear you?"

But she quickly perceived the state of the case, and took hold of him with a firm hand under his arm-pit. Thus supported, he tottered up the three steps and on into the kitchen and living-room, which was the main room of the house, and there she let him sink into a wooden chair. His head flopped down upon his breast; he was all but fainting.

He was aware of her standing before him and of her voice.

"Here! Drink this!" she ordered.

It was harsh, tongue-stinging Algerian brandy, half an enameled mugful. It hurt his mouth and his throat tried to refuse it, but when he had succeeded in gulping it down, it spread about within him like a revivifying fire.

"Ha!" he breathed loudly, and sat up in the chair.

The girl was watching him.

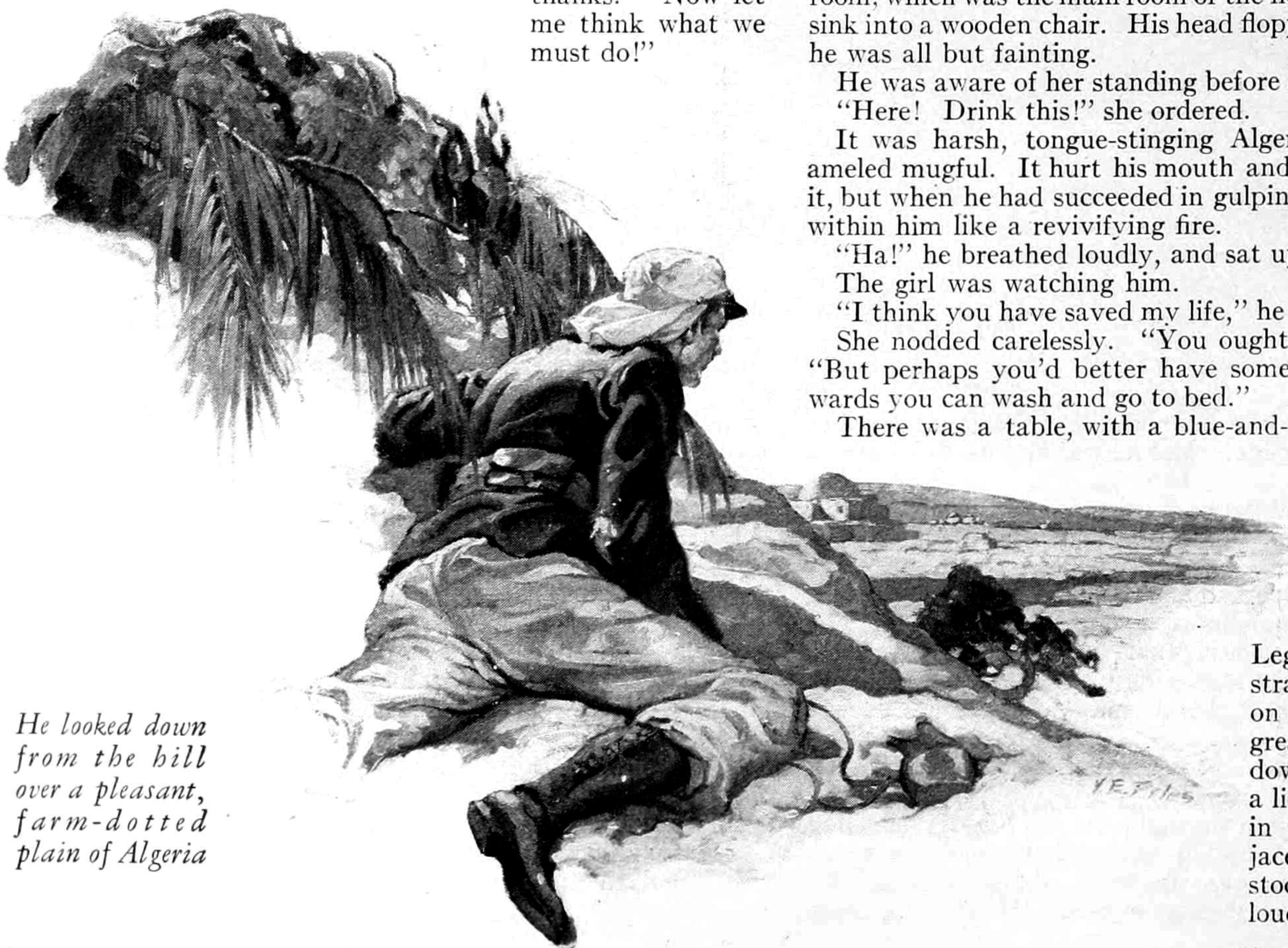
"I think you have saved my life," he said.

She nodded carelessly. "You ought to wash now," she said. "But perhaps you'd better have some food at once and afterwards you can wash and go to bed."

There was a table, with a blue-and-white checkered cloth on

it and eating utensils laid in readiness. There was coffee, wheaten bread and butter and a platter of cold veal. He was able to restrain—the

Legion had taught him restraint, too—a desire to fall on the food and wolf it in great mouthfuls. He sat down decorously, trembling a little. He leaped up again in alarm, for from an adjacent room, whose door stood ajar, came a series of loud strangling groans.



He looked down from the hill over a pleasant, farm-dotted plain of Algeria



A series of loud strangling groans from an adjacent room whose door stood ajar startled him into action

"What is that?" he cried, half afraid that he was being trapped. The girl half-smiled at his fear. "It is only the gross mütterchen—grandma," she answered. "She is old and ill and she always does that. Sit down again and eat."

He obeyed. The sound, clean, palatable food, the sweet savory coffee, were a delight as well as a restorative. For years he had lacked these decencies, this comfort. He looked about the big room with a romantic appreciation of its scrupulous cleanliness and order. The copper pans, the horsehair sofa of state, the side-table with a zither on it, the tall, robust girl with her doll's face and her man's eyes—here was Germany itself, orderly, comfortable, decent, established in the wild.

When he had done eating, she gave him a cigarette of rank local tobacco, and sat and watched him while he smoked it. She did not talk with him or question him. Later, she showed him where to wash and then it was time for him to climb to the loft and go to bed.

"I have put some blankets and a pillow there for you," she said. "And you must not come down in the daytime or the Negro

woman will see you and betray you. I will bring you up some food in the morning."

He wanted to kiss her hand but she would not suffer it.

"No," she said. "Here is your candle. There are no windows up there so you can safely burn it. And here are some more cigaretttes. You must make yourself comfortable while you can."

He looked down from the top of the ladder and saw her at the bottom, still watching him with her tranquil face under her crown of gold-glinting hair.

The almost forgotten luxury of a bed! She had been better than her word, for besides the blankets and the pillow there was a mattress. In shirt and trousers, wrapped in the blanket he lay, smoking blissfully, the candle burning steadfastly at his elbow, savoring to the full the new and wonderful sense of safety.

"She saved my life!" he said. It was his good-night prayer. He carefully put away the butt of his cigarette, blew out his candle and turned to the business of sleeping.

It was some hours later that he was awakened by sounds from below. He had no means of telling the (Continued on page 58)

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An Enemy Debt

(Continued from page 17)

hour; but he cast off his blankets and crept to the head of the ladder. It was yet dark, but from the room where he had supped there shone the feeble light of a candle. The grandmother was groaning again, horrible long-drawn groans of senile pain and self-pity. And then he heard the girl speak.

"Oh, all right, then!" she was saying and there was no mistaking the resentment in her tone. "I'll warm some milk at once, if that will keep you quiet!"

More groans, and the sound of the girl's footsteps coming from the bedroom into the big room, the scratch of a sulphur match and a tinkle of vessels! Egon Weiler carefully descended the ladder.

The girl in a flannel night-dress, was stooping over a lampstove, a jug of milk on the floor beside her. Her hair hung down her back in two long plaits. She looked up, unstartled but with inquiry, as he tiptoed in.

"I heard," he said. "I wake easily nowadays. Let me do that for you."

She considered as usual before replying, gazing at his face, now washed and comely.

"Very well," she said, rising. "Do not let it boil, and bring it in when it is ready."

He nodded understandingly; she went back to the old woman and he bent to his task.

Five minutes later, he tapped gently on the bedroom door and was bidden to enter. It was a small square room, half filled by a big old-fashioned bed. A mountainous German feather bed quilt was upon it, and over the curve of it there appeared, propped upon pillows, an emaciated old face framed in the frills of a nightcap. The eyes in the face glittered strangely in the candle-light; the toothless mouth writhed continually, and as Egon Weiler paused to stare, it opened to emit a deep anguished groan.

The girl had been sitting by the bedside. She rose and took the jug, and poured some of the contents into a cup. From a medicine bottle she added a few drops of some drug.

"Here!" she said to the old woman. "Here's your milk!"

The invalid drank. The girl turned to Egon Weiler. "You'd better go back to bed," she said. "She'll go to sleep for a little now, but I'll have to sit up with her in case she wakes and wants more."

Weiler hesitated. "I can sleep all day," he said. "If I were permitted—if it is only a matter of giving her to drink—could I not save the gracious young lady the trouble of sitting up? You—er—" he gulped foolishly—"you have been so good to me."

Again that pause of watchful consideration.

"Very well," she said. "It is four

o'clock now; you must go up again at six. If she wakes after that I shall hear her. This is the medicine—six drops in every cup."

They do and suffer strange things in the Legion; they gain strange knowledge and pay strange prices for it. But they endure nothing stranger than that vigil of the deserter by the grandmother's bedside, with the cuckoo clock in the big room ticking like a tack-hammer, the old woman groaning heartrendingly in her sleep and the candle burning down to a tall-flamed ruin of grease. Twice he fed her gently and patiently, and when the cuckoo clock struck the hour of six, he rose and stole aloft with the feeling of one who wakes from the grotesqueness of a dream to the sobriety of reality.

He was asleep when the girl came up at nine o'clock with food and coffee, but woke in the accustomed panic as she laid it down beside him.

"It's all right," she said. "I have sent the Negro woman out on an errand. Light your candle."

He obeyed. He looked up at her and saw that she was smiling, really smiling for once.

"You must have done wonders last night," she said. "This morning the grossmütterchen keeps asking for 'the man.' 'Las' den Mann mich pflegen!'—let the man take care of me!—she says it again and again. You must go in and see her when you come down this evening."

"Gewiss!" he assented.

"And," she produced a printed paper, "there is this that you would like to see. You can keep it as a souvenir."

She gave it to him and departed. He leaned close to the candle to read it. It was the official handbill offering a reward for his capture. Height, age, distinguishing marks—all the rest of the inhuman catalogue of his dimensions—and, in blacker letters, for a sure inducement to all patriots: Nationality, German! Then the penalty for aiding or harboring him and last—the reward!

All they had left out, it seemed, was what they meant to do to him when they got him. That might have made the most bigoted would-be reward-gleaner hesitate—the months of black cell, of semi-starvation, of long drawn-out punishment drill and fatigue, of added years of service. But Egon Weiler knew it all. It soured his coffee for him, embittered his meat and spoiled his cigarette.

At midday the girl brought him food again, and with it a bottle of beer.

"But you are spoiling me," he protested. "Gnädiges Fräulein, it is too much and I am ashamed."

She shook her head. "No," she answered. "It is nothing. You must be

comfortable while you are here, at least. If there is anything you would like, you must ask for it."

"I would like to kiss your hand very humbly and gratefully," he said.

"No," she replied. "No! There is no need for that!"

In the evening, when she called him down to the big room, she had news for him. Her father would return the following evening and she must go six miles to the railway station to meet him.

"And while I am gone, you perhaps would sit with the grossmütterchen? She has been asking for you all day."

"Of course I will," he agreed. "It makes me happy to think I can do anything for you. I wish there were only something more difficult."

Her eyes were on his face, thoughtful and calm.

"Do you?" she said. "Well, perhaps there will be soon."

She gave him a half-mug of brandy after supper and sent him to sit with her grandmother while she cleared away the table things and washed them up. He was eager to do it all for her but she refused.

"Men do not wash dishes," she said conclusively. He could not make it clear that men *did*—and many worse and meaner things than that—with the death penalty hanging over them if they refused.

In the bedroom, the old grandmother recognized him forthwith and uttered a queer little crow of joyful welcome.

"Der Mann!" she croaked. "The man again. Ach, *you* are good; you will take care of me now—*nicht wahr?*"

"Yes, yes!" he soothed. "I will take care of you, gracious lady. Have no fear!"

He sat down by the bedside and a skinny old claw of a hand struggled forth from under the counterpane and groped toward him. He met it with his hand and was forthwith clutched.

"The man," murmured the old woman, contentedly. "Der guter Mann!"

And, holding to his fingers she fell into a doze.

He settled himself comfortably in the bedside chair, crossed his legs and dreamed. He had had a bedridden grandmother of his own once; he wondered if she were still alive. If so, there was a possibility that he would see her again before long. There were all kinds of possibilities; life had enlarged from the single dreadful dimensions of the Legion to a universe of possibilities. His reveries broke off as the girl looked in at the door.

"Ach, poor grossmütterchen," she said. "She doesn't want to lose her man." But she must have her medicine now and go to sleep properly."

The old woman took her medicine docilely enough from Weiler's hand, and even crooned something in the way of thanks. She was already sound asleep when he tiptoed from the room.

No noises (Continued on page 60)

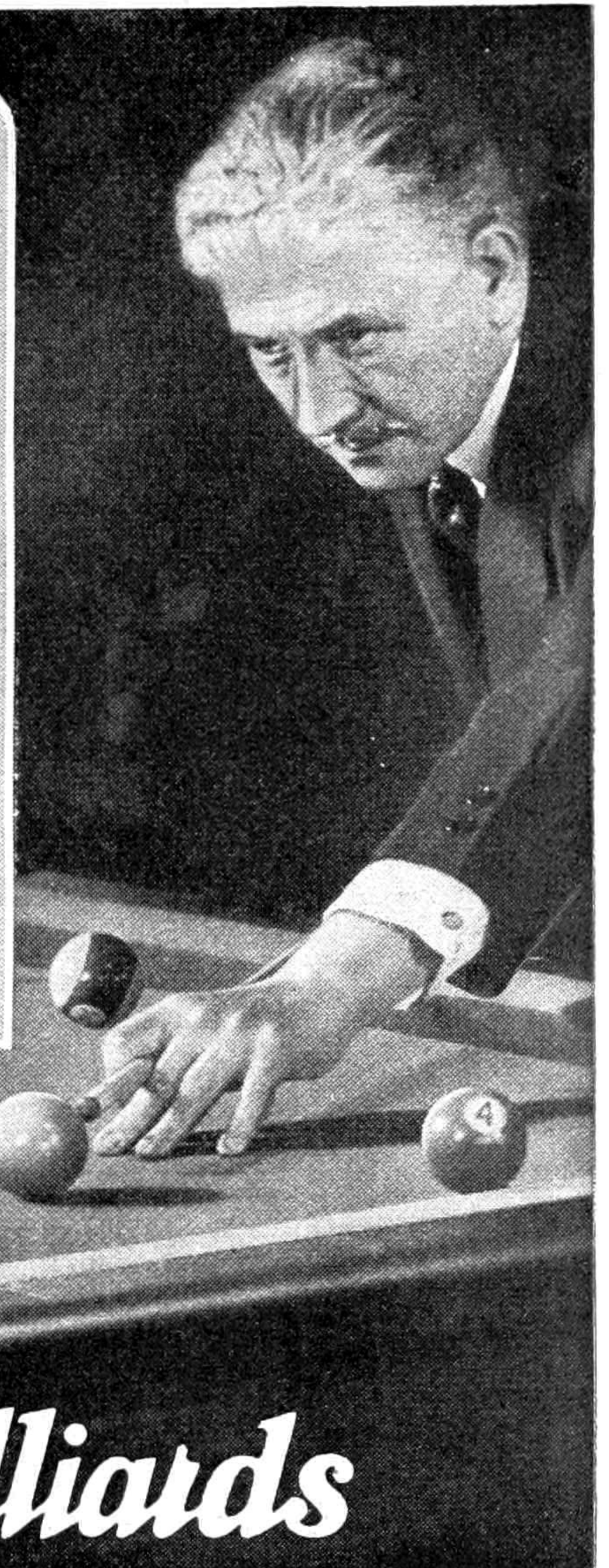
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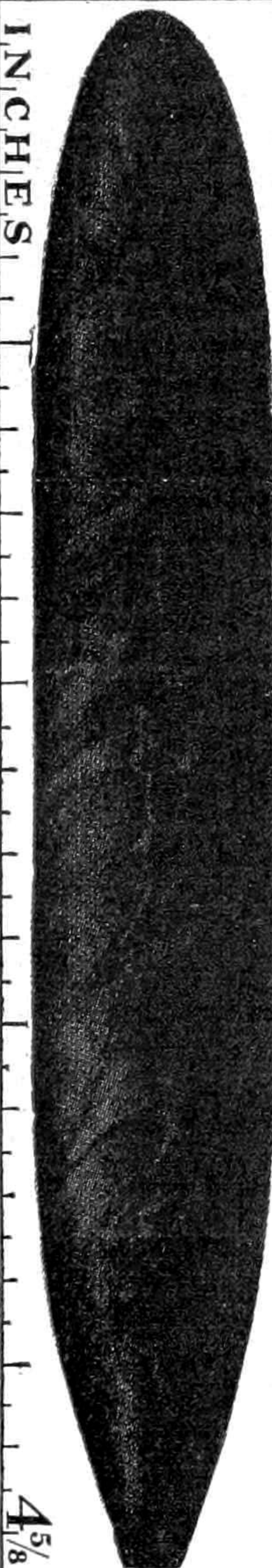
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An Enemy Debt

(Continued from page 59)

from below awoke him that night and the next day passed much as the last. The girl had to leave by mule cart before it was safe for him to descend, but his supper was laid out for him on the table. He ate it in comfort, then heated some milk and carried it into the grandmother's room.

Once more he had the pathetic glad welcome. "Der Mann; der guter Mann; he has come to take care of me!"

"That is right," he said gently. "I have come to take good care of you. And first you shall have a good cup of warm milk without any medicine in it."

"Ah, you are good," quavered the grandmother. "A good man!" She took the milk willingly and murmured gratefully.

The skinny hand found his as before when he took the chair by the bedside and again he settled himself to contented dreams. It was plain to him that without wise help he would not get much further. There were clothes to be obtained, the need for identification papers to be evaded, and from Algiers there was the sea to be crossed to Spain or Italy. A man's help, a German's—that was the way out. And then—

It was not long after that that he heard the hooves of the mules and the squeal of the cartwheels at the door. The girl's voice was distinguishable and immediately the front door opened. Then boots clumped across the floor, the bedroom door was pulled wide and Egon Weiler, not disengaging his left hand from the old woman's clasp, rose to confront a burly bearded man, overcoated and still wearing his hat. For some seconds the newcomer stared formidably without speaking.

"You are the deserter?" he demanded suddenly.

Weiler quailed, but the habit of prompt reply had been ground into him. "Yes, Herr!" he answered humbly.

"And a German?"

That sounded better. "Yes, Herr," he answered again with alacrity.

"And your name is Egon Weiler, Legionnaire of the Second Battalion?"

"Yes, Herr."

The big man nodded slowly. "Vollkommen—perfect!" he said. He turned and spoke apparently to the girl. "You heard?" he asked in French. "Very well; you can come in now."

And there entered forthwith, as the big man stood aside, not the girl, but a fully accoutred sergeant of the Legion, swagger, curled moustache, arrogance, power and all.

"Eh b'en, mon petit!" he said with a hangman's jocularly. "And art thou quite ready to go home with papa?"

Behind him were two other armed men who entered at his back. They came forward and laid hold of Egon. He had stood like stone till then, but as they grasped him he spoke.

"Careful," he said. "Don't wake her."

He drew his hand away gently and held forth both his wrists for the shackles.

The girl was in the front room whither they took him; she was at the table pouring brandy into an array of glasses. They placed their prisoner against the wall while they stood about and drank.

"He may have one?" she asked of the sergeant.

"Why not?" consented that demi-god carelessly. "It will be a memory for him."

Egon Weiler took the glass between his chained hands. His soul was ice. He looked at her over the raised glass, but he could not abash those chill blue eyes. Nevertheless he spoke.

"I will pay for this in full some day," he said.

She shook her head indifferently. "It is paid already," she answered. "The reward covers all."

And presently they took him away to his torment, his service and at the last, to the Chemin des Dames and the payment of his debt.

First Families

(Continued from page 23)

Fé friend in this detail I should have been up against it. A stranger can go to any New England or Southern community and learn who is who in no time. The genealogy shelf in the public library seems almost eager to speak. But there is not a printed book on New Mexican genealogy in existence. There is no need for one. The old grandee families are all related by marriage. They know who is who and display no more interest in informing the outside

world than the outside world has displayed in informing itself.

It is common, even among some of the Anglo-Saxon residents of New Mexico, to refer to their fellow citizens of Spanish blood as Mexicans. The Anglo-Saxons, by their own definition, are Americans. This offends the New Mexican of Spanish ancestry, although that is something one must find out for himself. The New Mexican of Spanish lineage may pity your lack of taste or